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ABSTRACT

"House Made of Dawn" by N. Scott Momaday is about language and the sacredness of the word and about what can be understood as a peculiarly Native American theory of rhetoric. All things are hinged to the physical landscape, nature, and the implications nature bears upon language. In Momaday's book, language does not represent external reality but is given precedence, such that there is no external reality except in terms of a primordial spirituality that embraces the individual's oneness with nature. Momaday tells readers about an idea lost to post-Socratic rhetorical theory, that of "physis," as being one with "nomos," where nature is an entity or activity that constitutes the "creative surge" of Being, and language, ever as much as nature, is an indigenous field where people dwell and discover the source of their being. Running through a sermon made by one character is the idea that truth lies in language. Truth is verbal, and to say there is something behind or beyond language that it symbolizes is to burden and obscure the truth. The focus is on words as a source of creation. Momaday defines racial memory as the commitment of a community of believers to a perfect integration of an individual's mind and spirit with that of his people, most concretely manifest in the rituals, legends, and beliefs of the oral tradition. Through this perspective, community is established and preserved through story and song, creating by means of language the cultural landscape through which being is acknowledged and identity is achieved. (MG)

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# NATIVE AMERICAN RHETORIC AND THE PRE-SOCRATIC IDEAL OF PHYSIS

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N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer winning novel, House Made of Dawn, has become a classic of Native American literature. It is the story of Abel, a young Pueblo Indian estranged from the traditions of his own community and yet unable to adhere to anything new in white culture. In fact, with the exception of the book's prologue and closing pages, Abel's presence throughout the novel is marked only by an ill-defined pathos. In one sense he is precisely the "wooden Indian" one character in the novel suggests him to be. In another, more clinical sense, he seems to be schizophrenic, his personality utterly smashed, forcing a complete loss of ego. Momaday identifies the source of Abel's angst by saying his relationship with the land has been severed, and he is therefore inarticulate, no longer attuned to the "old rhythms of the tongue" (57).

In the end Abel is brought back to his tribal roots. Central to his deliverance is the Navajo Night Chant, a rite of excorism and restoration, a healing ceremony meant to return the communicant to a harmonious relationship with the natural world. The Night Chant restores Abel's voice; he enters into what Momaday calls the "racial memory" of his people--the shared and inherited lore and rituals of the oral tradition.

That's the basic plot of House Made of Dawn, but more essentially the book is about language and the sacredness of the

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word--and what can be understood as a peculiarly Native American theory of rhetoric. Here, all things are hinged to the physical landscape, to nature, and the implications nature bears upon language.

To introduce the substance of the idea, I begin with a statement from Walking Buffalo, a Stoney Creek Indian quoted by Vine DeLoria in his book, God Is Red:

> "Did you know that trees talk? Well, they do. They talk to each other, and they'll talk to you if you listen. Trouble is, white people don't listen. They never learned to listen to Indians, so I don't suppose they'll listen to other voices of nature. But I have learned a lot from trees; sometimes about the weather, sometimes about animals, sometimes about the Great Spirit." (104)

Statements such as these, indicative of the Native American's reverence for the land, are familiar enough, but never, I think, as fully appreciated as they might be. At worst, we take them as mystical insinuations that we should be careful about where we put our toxic waste dumps or, more banal yet, that we shouldn't litter. At best, we take them as elaborate and beautifully constructed metaphors that say something abstract in terms of what is concrete, reflecting in this case something to do with the Indian's closeness and unity with nature. But the trouble with metaphors is that by their very nature we can never take them at their word, so that we can never believe in any literal way that Walking Buffalo is indeed listening to the voice of nature--which is precisely what he is claiming to do and

which, through Momaday, is the idea I propose to present in a rhetorical context.

At least from the time of Plato we have been diligent to make critical distinctions between nature and language, between things and words, res and verba. But in House Made of Dawn the two are never conceived as distinct things; indeed, they are so closely intertwined that to consider them separately is to lose the meaning of each. In Momaday's book, language does not represent external reality but is given precedence, such that there is no external reality except in terms of a "primordial spirituality" that embraces our oneness with nature--a spirituality that language creates and then invests with meaning. The book tells us about an idea lost to post-Socratic rhetorical theory, that of physis--not as we customarily understand it in contrast to nomos, as nature is opposed to words, but as being one with nomos, where nature is an entity or activity that constitutes the "creative surge" of Being, and language, ever as much as nature, is an indigenous field, where we dwell and discover the source of our being. Here, physis is understood in its purely Sophistic, pre-Socratic sense.

Specifically I focus on a sermon delivered by a character in House Made of Dawn, ironically named the "Priest of the Sun." He also figures in Abel's salvation, though it is never entirely clear whether it is for good or ill. You see, the Priest of the Sun conducts his services in the cold, damp basement of a warehouse and never sees the sun, except as a reddish yellow cardboard cutout he has fixed to the wall. He bears all the earmarks of Coyote, a trickster figure in Native American

mythologies, especially those of the Southwest. The Priest of the Sun is "shaggy and awful-looking...big, lithe as a cat, narrow-eyed," wears the black of a cleric, and has "the voice of a great dog" (85). His real name is the "Right Reverend John Big Bluff Tosamah" and as a trickster, we had best be wary of him. He shatters decorum, is a bit treacherous, and sometimes plays the dolt or fool, but we ignore or disbelieve him at our peril. So this figure, Big Bluff Tosamah, offers a sermon in Abel's presence, taking his text from the gospel according to Saint John. In it, he talks about the Word, and Rhetoric:

> "In principio erat Verbum...In the beginning was the Word...Now what do you suppose old John meant by that? That cat was a preacher, and, well, you know how it is with preachers; he had something big on his mind. Oh my, it was big; it was the truth, and it was heavy, and old John hurried to set it down. And in his hurry he said too much...It was the truth, all right, but it was more than the truth. The Truth was overgrown with fat, and the fat was John's God, and God stood between John and the Truth.
>
> "In the beginning was the word...Brothers and sisters, that was the truth, the whole of it, the essential and eternal Truth, the bone and blood and muscle of the Truth. But he went on, Old John, because he was a preacher. The perfect vision faded from his mind...He couldn't let the Truth alone. He couldn't see that he had come to the end of the Truth, and he went on. He tried to make it bigger and better than it was, but instead he only demeaned and

encumbered it. He made it soft and big with fat. He was a preacher, and he made a complex sentence of the Truth, two sentences, three, a paragraph. He made a sermon and theology of the truth. He imposed his idea of God upon the everlasting Truth.

"He went on to lay a scheme about the Word. He could find no satisfaction in the simple fact that the word <u>was</u>; he had to account for it, not in terms of that sudden and profound insight, which must have devasted him at once, but only in terms of the moment afterward, which was irrelevant and remote; not in terms of his imagination but only in terms of his prejudice.

"Now, brothers and sisters, old John was a white man, and the white man has his ways, Oh gracious me, he has his ways. He talks about the Word. He talks through it and around it. He builds upon it with syllables, with prefixes and suffixes, and hyphens and accents. He adds and divides and multiplies the Word. And in all of this he substracts the Truth." (85-89)

That is the essence of the tone and content of the better part of Tosamah's sermon, but he rambles on and on in the reiteration of a theme, and in apt measure of his role as a trickster, he commits in his verbosity the same sin he accuses John of committing. However, running through Tosamah's sermon is the idea that the Truth, the sum total of it, lies in language, and in this and other matters, Tosamah is no doubt Momaday's mouthpiece. Truth is verbal, and to say there is something behind or beyond language that it symbolizes--say, some realm of

ideal forms, God, or any world or idea that precedes our words--is to burden and obscure the truth. As Tosamah says, it is the fat of Saint John's God standing between John and the truth that renders life opaque to those experiences that Momaday would say enrich and enoble life.

It would seem that Tosamah indicts as prejudicial everything that is discursive or reflective in language, yet in the context of the "profound insight" afforded by the Word, he might well be justified in doing so. The Western tradition is based on the fundamental distinction between body and soul, and as Pierre Bourdieu says, our understanding of nature is the product of a "long labor of disenchantment" (167). This attitude reaches its apotheosis with the existentialist movement, and is particularly pronounced in Albert Camus, whose works accentuate premises in place from the time of Plato. In his severance of language from nature, Camus achieves the most violent contrast to the Native American view, claiming that our salvation lies in metaphysical revolt against the "human condition." Here, external reality is indeed "external," fixed and final, and does not owe its being and nature to our awareness of it, and that--for what truly typifies the existentialists--external reality acts as the material restraint on the spirit of man, setting absolute limits, and man lives as a result pitted against the world inasmuch as his consciousness gains realization only in opposition to it. The world is perceived, then, as a "brute existent," revealing its "primitive hostility" at every turn. Thus, to achieve the vindicating mode of consciousness celebrated by Camus, we live by

a series of failed attempts to bridge the gap between nature and ourselves by means of language; we live, as a result, "inevitably as blasphemers," in verbal assult "against the whole of creation" (Rebel 24), screaming our outrage in the confrontation between "human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Sisyphus 41).

Tosmah's sermon not only challenges this position, but it has a positive side to it, a restitution that follows the rebuke of the white man's language. The focus is on words, not as a means of reflection, but as a source of creation, for nothing is pre-existent or prior to words in the Native American world view, certainly nothing in the sense of the "primitive hostility" of the world described by Camus. "A word has power in and of itself," Momaday says. "It comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things. By means of words can a man deal with the world on equal terms. And the word is sacred" (Rainy Mountain 42). Indeed, the "silence" that pervades House Made of Dawn, in stark contrast to the "unreasonable silence" that Camus confronts, becomes the backdrop to the creative agency of language central to the novel. It is here that Tosamah functions most ably as Momaday's mouthpiece. At long last, Tosamah renders the precision and imaginative clarity of the Word as compellingly as we would expect it to be rendered:

> "There was a voice, a sound, a word--and everything began....At the distance of a star something happened, and everything began. The Word did not break upon the silence, but it was older than the silence and the silence was made of it." (House Made of Dawn 91)

On the basis of this silence a dialogue is established, where listening is given the emphasis, a dialogue not between two sentient centers that was Plato's wont to call our souls, nor yet a dialogue established with a text--but with the land, so that both man and nature are appropriated by words. It is fundamentally a pre-Socratic form of perception, whereby particulars are woven into the whole, into the perfect oneness of an undivided sphere. And the world, rather than rearing in primitive hostility, circles back upon itself, redundant with the life that embraces man, for man discovers its references within himself. Like Walking Buffalo, we hear nature speak to us. As Momaday explains the matter in The Way to Rainy Mountain:

> "East of my grandmother's house the sun rises out of the plain. Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remmembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk. (113)

In Momaday's conviction there is indeed a fusion of consciousness with the landscape. And when he speaks of the land, the earth, or of nature, what he invaribly has in mind is the concrete actuality of the physical world, the land and the

landscape as a visible, tangible thing. Thus, the land is neither a symbol nor a metaphor referring to something beyond itself, but the timeless source of the mystery of being that is at hand in the immediate and concrete.

There is, then, an "indissoluble unity" between word and referent, "a complete congruence between 'image' and 'object,' between the name and the thing," so that, as Cassirer tells us of such a mentality, "the conscious experience is not merely wedded to the word, but is consumed by it" (58). In this context, language, like the logos of the primordial first word, is creative; but creative only in terms of a consciousness that, being sacred, provides a means of imagination that enables us to look at the world, see it, and realize it, thus giving it new and spiritual existence within ourselves. Reality, or the world, is not comprehended as lucidity, reason, or reflection informs us of reality, but is apprehended in an act of creation.

This unity of language, nature, and ourselves is specifically apparent in the early Greek conception of physis. Here, nature is not understood as a formless mass, brute existent, or in its "primitive hostility"; rather, it is rife with a life force expressing the coalescence of man and nature, for this life force is fundamentally the source of each. Given this perspective, apprehension, and more specifically language, is not a faculty belonging to man but a process that engages him, "happens" to him, through his reciprocal bond with physis. As the example of Walking Bear attests, language gives utterance to itself; we "dwell" in language; it constitutes an abode no different and as pervasive nature itself, for in the deepest

sense nature is the Word. Hence, having no independent existence apart from physis, our being is determined and defined only in terms of the corporeal manifestation of language. We would live in a House Made of Dawn, and given Momaday's rendering of the cipher, language is, as Heidegger has so often claimed, the House of Being.

The essential harmony of man and the earth on which he lives, as it is apparent in physis, is closely aligned to another Greek term pivotal to our understanding of the of the pre-Socratics--that of doxa. The term is usually translated--very inadequately, I think--as "opinion," to perhaps distinguish it from the eternal verities present in Platonism. However, Bourdieu's translation is more pertinent to our discussion: Doxa expresses the "quasi-perfect fit" of the natural and social, where the world of tradition is experienced as the natural world, their concordance thereby taken for granted. Here, physis and doxa cannot be distinguished in any qualitative sense. And here, as well, there is an equivalent in Momaday's world view. Momaday calls it "racial memory," and it means the commitment of a community of believers--by means of a consciousness that is sacred, communal, and linked to an affirmation of the land--to a perfect integration of one's mind and spirit with that of his people, most concretely manifest in the rituals, legends, and beliefs of the oral tradition. It is through this perspective alone that community is established and preserved through story and song, creating by means of language the cultural landscape through which we come to acknowledge our being and achieve our

identity. It is, after all, through the language of the Night Chant that Abel obtains his deliverance, has his racial memory restored, and achieves his place and purpose in the world. Insofar as he is part of the landscape, he shares in the racial memory of his people; and insofar as he achieves that, he dwells in language. He is, then, as Momaday says, "a man made of words."

In the end, what we have in Momaday is a contemporary writer dealing with a still vital and thriving culture, yet invoking many of the attitudes and perspectives of the pre-Socratics, serving almost as an emissary from their world to ours. As I have attempted to relate here, the pre-Socratic ideal of physis is a case in point. Thus, we need not rely solely on scattered fragments, and the often jaundiced views of Plato and those who function within his inheritance, to come to a more cogent and honest appreciation of the Sophists.

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